Is Character Still an Issue?

Maj Carl D. Rehberg, USAF*

Character is the bedrock on which the edifice of leadership rests. . . . Without [character], particularly in the military profession, failure in peace, disaster in war or, at best, mediocrity in both will result.

—Gen Matthew Ridgway

THE INTENT OF the current Air Force core values initiative is both noble and vitally important. The initiative consists of the publication **United States Air Force Core Values** (also known as the **Little Blue Book**)[1] and three major strategies: a schoolhouse "weave" (education), a field weave (leadership element), and a continuation phase. It also includes **The Guru's Guide** and a four-day course that prepares gurus to help with this program.[2] Unlike the core values initiative of 1993, the current program does not seem to be in danger of drifting away due to neglect.

Report Documentation Page			*Form Approved* *OMB No. 0704-0188*

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

1. REPORT DATE **1998**	2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED **00-00-1998 to 00-00-1998**
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Is Character Still an Issue?**			5a. CONTRACT NUMBER
			5b. GRANT NUMBER
			5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER
6. AUTHOR(S)			5d. PROJECT NUMBER
			5e. TASK NUMBER
			5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **Air and Space Power Journal,155 N. Twining Street,Maxwell AFB,AL,36112-6026**			8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)			10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
			11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT   **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited**

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT

15. SUBJECT TERMS

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT **Same as Report (SAR)**	18. NUMBER OF PAGES **8**	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT **unclassified**	b. ABSTRACT **unclassified**	c. THIS PAGE **unclassified**			

Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

Table 1

A Comparison of USAF Values Initiatives

	Emphasis on Character Development	Level of Chaplain Involvement	Spiritual Emphasis	Ethical Environment[a] Major Emphasis
1997 Core Values Initiative	No	Very Little	Very Little	Yes
1993 Core Values Initiative	Yes	Involved	Indirect: More than 1997	No
Adult Values Education (1974)	Yes	High	Relatively High	No
Moral Leadership Program (1961)	Yes	High	Very High	No
Dynamics of Moral Leadership (1957)	Yes	High	Very High	No
Character Guidance Program (1948)	Yes	Very High	Very High	No

Source: Adapted from Gregory J. Dierker, "Core Values: A History of Values-Related Initiatives in the Air Force" (thesis, Air Force Institute of Technology, September 1997), 154–55.

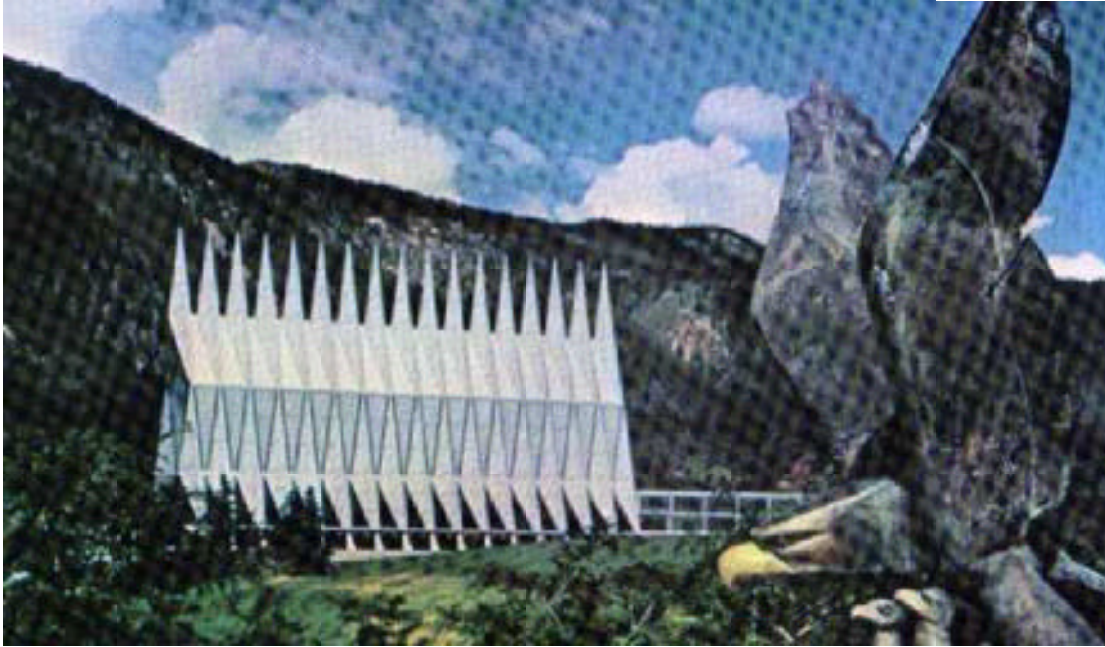[a] The ethical environment includes policies, processes (systems), and procedures.

Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force highlights the importance of our core values and sets the stage for the future Air Force.[3] With its comprehensive and cohesive architecture, the current program may be one of the best designed ones from an overall policy perspective.[4] It also includes some innovative teaching methods and techniques.

Overall, the people involved in the initiative should be commended for their efforts. However, we need to analyze and address several troubling paradigm shifts in order to improve this program, which is so critical to the future of the Air Force.

Historically, character education has always been integral to the military profession in Western culture. Aristotle, the teacher of Alexander the Great, developed a theory of philosophy in terms of excellent character traits or virtues. Aristotle believed that one can become an excellent person by performing excellent actions until doing so becomes habitual. "Over the centuries the profession of arms has developed a number of principles, traits, rituals and codes that have served soldiers, in peace and war, very well."[5] In this country, we have combined the great wisdom of the sages and have encouraged the religious and spiritual aspects of life, dating from our first commander in chief.[6]

In a thesis recently completed at the Air Force Institute of Technology, Gregory J. Dierker identifies significant changes to the most recent Air Force values initiative. On the positive side, changes have occurred that include more commander involvement and a focus on the ethical environment. On the

The chapel at the US Air Force Academy. The founders of the Academy clearly recognized the significance of healthy spiritual life in the formation of balanced officers.

negative side, changes include "a reduced emphasis on character development and the greatly reduced role that the chaplain plays in these values-related initiatives"[7] (see table 1).

A Paradigm Shift from Character?

Our first task is to fix organizations; individual character development is possible, but it is not a goal.

—Little Blue Book

With this bold statement, the **Little Blue Book** declares a decided shift in emphasis. It also notes that "long before we seek to implement a character development program, we must thoroughly evaluate and, where necessary, fix our policies, processes and procedures."[8] **The Guru's Guide** dismisses and muddies the character[9] issue even further: "Character development will probably take place . . . but that will be a happy byproduct and not a strategic goal."[10] This is confusing at best, a paradigm shift at worst.

Throughout history, people who have served in the military have always known that effectiveness and success rest far more on the moral quality of officers and other personnel than on technical expertise.[11] Gen Nathan Twining, former Air Force chief of staff, wrote that "technical proficiency alone is not enough."[12] The best weapons money can buy are literally worthless unless one has people who can think critically and use them properly. One also needs military leaders who are worthy of honor and trust. As Col Anthony E. Hartle of West Point writes, "Persons of strong character are the ultimate resource for any military organization."[13] Historically, character and competence have been foundations of professionalism and leadership. "The

essence of professionalism," writes Lewis Sorely, "is character."[14] "In over 500 interviews with military general officers, Dr. Edgar Puryear found that the most important quality in leadership without exception was character."[15]

Historically, all the service academies have emphasized character development, and the Air Force Academy and the Naval Academy have formed departments to address this topic. Ironically, the overall Air Force appears to be moving in another direction.

Personal and professional character development is essential because the organization consists of the characters of its individual members. Interestingly, the two nationally known experts in this area, Dr. W. Edwards Deming and Dr. Stephen Covey, believe that both organizations and people need to be changed. Further, Dr. Covey states that people should be changed first: "Not only must personal change precede organizational change, but personal quality must precede organizational quality."[16]

Title 10, US Code Armed Forces, underscores the importance of individual character development: "All commanding officers and others in authority in the Air Force are required to show in themselves a good example of virtue, honor, patriotism, and subordination; to be vigilant in inspecting the conduct of all persons who are placed under their command; to guard against and suppress all dissolute and immoral practices."[17]

What has changed so that character development is no longer important? Air Force Manual (AFM) 50-21, **Living for Leadership,** notes that its purpose is "to assist you in developing your character in terms of that ideal which is proper to the American tradition."[18]

One also sees a possible paradigm shift in the demand for "faith in the system." Surely **faith is the wrong term to use here:** our faith can be placed in a high principle or a Supreme Being but not a "system." One can abuse and undermine a system; moreover, a system (e.g., a bureaucracy) allows one to maintain appearances, all the while permitting personal failings and abuses. Shouldn't we return to an emphasis on personal and professional character? We can place our trust in individuals of strong and honorable character but not in a system. People who think we have bypassed the need for character because we are in a revolution in military affairs (RMA) should think again.

Minimizing Chaplain Involvement?

In the section of the **Little Blue Book** entitled "The Core Values Strategy," the very first assumption puts a fence around chapel programs: "The Core Values Strategy exists independently of and does not compete with Chapel programs."[19] Shouldn't chaplains work in concert with the core values strategy rather than remain separated from it? Chaplains were originally chartered to work in areas concerning character. Early on, the Air Force defined the function of the chaplain as follows: "primarily a minister of religion, and as such is the advisor to the commanding general or commanding officer on all matters pertaining to the religious life, morals and character-building factors within a given command."[20] By ignoring the spiritual dimension,[21] we may be adopting what Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter calls a "culture of disbelief" similar to the rest of society that ridicules, disdains, and mocks people who are serious about spiritual matters.[22]

Clearly, the spiritual dimension can provide positive motivation to do what is right. Spiritual roots can provide a solid foundation, a motivation, and a sense of meaning and purpose to do what is right. "Character education can be hollow and misleading when taught within a curriculum that is silent

about religion."[23] There are consequences when radical secularism or a "culture of disbelief" reigns. According to William Bennett, "Whatever your faith—or even if you have none at all—it is a fact that when millions of people stop believing in God, or when their belief is so attenuated as to be belief in name only, enormous public consequences follow. And when this is accompanied by an aversion to spiritual language by the political and intellectual class the public consequences are even greater."[24]

The **Little Blue Book** and the **Guru's Guide** say nothing positive about spirituality or religion, although they clearly set a tone in several areas of what religion is **not** to do. For example, "Military professionals must remember that religious choice is a matter of individual conscience."[25] Why not include a balancing statement such as, "Commanders should support and encourage their subordinates to develop their spirituality." This is a matter of free exercise of religion and a recognition of the positive role played by religion among an overwhelming number of military personnel. Although this document is not blatantly bigoted or antireligious, it seems ignorant of the spiritual domain.

The **Little Blue Book** and the **Guru's Guide** ignore how spiritual aspects can be a positive part of this whole process. We can look to the USAF Academy for an example.[26] Specifically, the academy's **Character Development Manual** states that "the founders of the Academy clearly recognized the significance of healthy spiritual life in the formation of balanced officers. That is why we have the Spiritual/Ethical Domain. Although the spiritual aspect is not mandatory, it provides many cadets with a strong motivation for character development."[27]

In a recent article in **Airpower Journal**, Col Charles R. Myers does an admirable job of defending core values from some unwarranted attacks.[28] By framing the structure of morality in the context of moral reasoning, he marginalizes the importance of the affective domain that gives one purpose and motivation to do the right thing. Doing the right thing when we would rather not may be the $64

Honor, Duty, Country—we must be faithful to these ideals because the truth does matter, and character has been (and must remain) an issue in the Air Force now, and as we enter the twenty-first century.

question in ethics. How do we have the motivation to do the right thing? How do we have a change of disposition or a change of heart? According to Plato, this "spirited element" should not be ignored.[29]

The **Little Blue Book**'s functionalism seems hollow and cries out for a deeper philosophy. It presents the core values as purely functional, without any attention to foundations or deeper motivations that are essential to ethical understanding and practice. Given the postmodernist movement that is sweeping the academic and intellectual circles of this country, foundations are critically important.[30]

Military Character Education: More than Core Values

Without a doubt, core values are vital to tomorrow's Air Force. Character education has always involved values. Core values and the ethical environment are only a part of charac-

ter development. According to Air Force Academy Instruction 36-158, **Supporting Cadet Character Development**, "character devel-

---

"Good people aren't always good soldiers, but good soldiers are always good people."

---

opment encompasses more than just the Honor Code; it also includes the Air Force and Academy Core Values, Academy Character Development Outcomes, human relations, ethics, and moral and spiritual development."[31] Additionally, military academies were founded on the concept of developing virtues.

Over the last five or six years, public schools have started to return to character education. Historically, all the service academies have emphasized character development, and the Air Force Academy and the Naval Academy have formed departments to address this topic. Ironically, the overall Air Force appears to be moving in another direction. "A much larger than expected number of U.S. schools have introduced character education during the 1993–1995 period or are preparing to do so soon. . . . The rapid spread of character education currently underway represents a return to the traditional role of schools as one of society's most important institutions for developing good character in young people."[32]

The point is that core values are important, but they are not sufficient. They cannot take the place of comprehensive character development. Character education is a comprehensive, multifaceted approach to moral development.[33]

The Core Values Program is a good first step in one area of character development. If we are truly concerned about the Air Force of the twenty-first century, we can and must do much more. First, we should make character development a primary focus—not merely a strategic goal or just another program.[34] Second, the Air Force should start with its number-one criterion for selection and promotion: strong and honorable character.[35] "Good people aren't always good soldiers, but good soldiers are always good people."[36] Third, we must adopt comprehensive character-development architecture that includes teaching virtues and ethics—especially the cardinal virtues[37] and the development of conscience, ethical reasoning, and decision making.[38] Fourth, we should work together with chaplains, acknowledge the importance of the spiritual dimension, and use the Chaplain Corps in a positive manner.[39] Fifth, we need a follow-on document to the **Little Blue Book** that delineates our leadership and character philosophies in the same way the Marine Corps does it in its Fleet Marine Forces Manuals. Sixth, we need to encourage and support the return to character education in public schools, which has strong bipartisan support. Seventh, we should initiate a comprehensive study similar to **Ethics in the US Air Force: 1988** to assess our strengths and weaknesses.[40]

A return to character development with more chaplain involvement as a strategic goal and a primary focus will be neither an easy task nor a panacea—but it is the right thing to do. Character is more than a program. It must be as important as the weapons we build and even our budget total obligation authority. It is the cornerstone of our most important asset—people! We must be faithful to the ideals of Honor, Duty, Country[41] because the truth does matter, and character has been (and must remain) an issue in the Air Force now, and as we enter the twenty-first century. □

Notes

1. *United States Air Force Core Values* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1997). Hereinafter referred to as the *Little Blue Book*.

2. The *Little Blue Book*, the **Guru's Guide**, speeches, quotes, essays, books, periodicals, directives, and other documents related to the core values initiative; on-line, Internet, available from http://www.usafa.af.mil/core-value. Gurus are persons selected by their local commands (wing and above) to serve as advisors and resource managers, and as authoritative, local sources of information about the core values initiative.

3. *Global Engagement: A Vision for the 21st Century Air Force* (Washington, D.C.: Department of the Air Force, 1997).

4. Gregory J. Dierker, "Core Values: A History of Values-Related Initiatives in the Air Force" (thesis, Air Force Institute of Technology, September 1997), 83.

5. James H. Toner, **True Faith and Allegiance: The Burden of Military Ethics** (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 128.

6. "The importance and influence of the chaplain to the moral health of the unit and in spiritual matters have been valued throughout the history of the Army, beginning with our first commander in chief to the present." See Army Regulation 165-1, **Chaplain Activities in the United States Army**, 31 August 1989, 5.

7. Dierker, viii.

8. **Little Blue Book**.

9. Note the following definitions of **character**: (1) "The sum of those qualities of moral excellence, which stimulates a person to do the right thing, which is manifested through right and proper actions, despite internal or external pressures to the contrary" [USAF Academy]; (2) "Character describes a person's inner strength and is the link between values and behaviors" [FM 22-100]; (3) "Moral knowing, feeling, and behavior: knowing the good, desiring the good, and doing the good" [Thomas Lickona]; and (4) "Moral excellence: right conduct (self-control, moderation) in relation to oneself and in relation to others" [Aristotle]. United States Air Force Academy, **Character Development Manual** (Colorado Springs, Colo.: US Air Force Academy, December 1994), 9–10.

10. **Guru's Guide**, VI-3.

11. See Richard A. Gabriel, **To Serve with Honor: A Treatise on Military Ethics and the Way of a Soldier** (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1982).

12. Air Force Manual (AFM) 50-21, **Living for Leadership**, August 1955, foreword.

13. Anthony E. Hartle, **Moral Issues in Military Decision Making** (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 84.

14. Quoted in Toner, 117.

15. **Character Development Manual**, 18; and Dr. Edgar Puryear, **19 Stars** (Novato, Calif.: Presidio, 1971).

16. Stephen R. Covey, **Principle-Centered Leadership** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 265.

17. Title 10, United States Code Armed Forces, sec. 8583, in S. 936. This requirement became effective 18 November 1997. Historically, the Air Force has taken a similar stand. "An officer, or any other Air Force leader, is held responsible for the military and moral domain of his men." AFM 50-21, 59. See also Rick Maze, "Commanders Face New Leadership Requirements," **Air Force Times** 58, no. 18 (18 December 1997): 7.

18. AFM 50-21, 4.

19. **Little Blue Book**.

20. Dierker, 157. Although current Air Force instructions no longer have this requirement, the Army maintains it. According to Army Field Manual (FM) 16-1, **Religious Support**, 26 May 1995, "The chaplain develops and implements religious programs and activities, and advises the commander on matters of relgion, morals, and morale" (page 2). Additionally, Army Regulation 165-1 supports this notion with a full chapter on the responsibilities for chaplains in moral leadership training.

According to SECNAVINST 1730.7A, **The Chaplain Corps**, 2 September 1993, chaplains "advise the commanding officer or commander on moral issues and provide input to programs which emphasize the core values of the naval service" (page 2).

21. The words **spiritual** and **religious** are used synonymously in this article. **Spiritual** means the intangible relationship we have with the supernatural. **Religious** does not mean religiosity, which tends to suggest rules, external performance, pretense, and so forth. See Dr. Ron Jenson, **Making a Life, Not Just a Living** (Atlanta: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1995), 155.

22. For many people, religious beliefs provide a strong motivation for ethical action and character development. This does not imply that people without religious convictions do not have strong and honorable characters. According to Lt Col Terry Moore, USAF, Retired, first chief of the Character and Ethics Division, Center for Character Development, "Even those who are not 'religious' in the traditional sense often [can] have 'spiritual commitments' in a wider sense. Such people have a sense of humility stemming from an understanding of how their personal purposes fit into a context of something greater than themselves." See **Character Development Manual**, 42. The larger question is, Are people more likely to be good without God? Persons can be good without religion, God, or spiritual awareness, just as religious or spiritual-minded people can be bad or evil. The question is, How likely and prevalent is this case? See Dennis Prager, "Can You Be Good without God?" **Ultimate Issues** 9, no. 1 (1993); and Stephen L. Carter, **The Culture of Disbelief: How American Law and Politics Trivialize Religious Devotion** (New York: Basic Books, 1993). For both the atheist and theist, this debate provides cognitive dissonance.

23. Charles Haynes, "Character Education in the Public Schools," in **Finding Common Ground** (Nashville: Freedom Forum First Amendment Center, 1994), 14-1 through 14-2. According to C. S. Lewis, "We remove the organ and demand the function. We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We castrate and bid the geldings be fruitful." Quoted in William J. Bennett, ed., **The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories** (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 264–65.

24. William J. Bennett, "Revolt against God," **Policy Review**, Winter 1994, 19–24. In **The Brothers Karamozov**, Fyodor Dostoyevsky noted that "if God does not exist, everything is permissible." Quoted in Jenson, 155. Stephen L. Carter talks about how far our society has gone regarding its disdain for the spiritual. Ironically, this commentary comes from a liberal—not a religious conservative. See his **Culture of Disbelief**.

25. **Little Blue Book**. "Professionals, and especially commanders, must not take it upon themselves to change or coercively influence the religious views of subordinates."

26. In August 1993, the US Air Force Academy formed the Center for Character Development. See Maj Brian F. Hall, with Col David A. Wagie, "The US Air Force Academy's Cutting-Edge Character Development Program," **Airpower Journal** 10, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 35–39. Ironically, the center was the idea and vision of Chaplain, Maj Brian Van Sickle.

27. **Character Development Manual**. The spiritual/ethical domain is one of the four domains at the Air Force Academy. The others are academic, military training, and athletic. Additionally, the academy has developed a character development outcome that emphasizes the spiritual dimension.

28. Col Charles R. Myers, "The Core Values: Framing and Resolving Ethical Issues for the USAF," **Airpower Journal** 11, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 38–52. Colonel Myers states that core values are a framework for moral reasoning. My argument is that moral reasoning is only one part of comprehensive character development that includes the cognitive, affective, and behavioral domains. My contention is that moral reasoning alone is not sufficient. See also C. S. Lewis, **The Abolition of Man** (New York: Macmillan, 1947).

29. See Charles W. Colson, "A Question of Ethics," **Airpower Journal** 10, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 4–12.

30. Postmodernism is "the movement in late twentieth-century thought that rejects enlightenment, rationalism, individualism, and optimism. Postmodernism is characterized by nihilism and radical subjectivity." Dennis McCallum, **The Death of Truth** (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1996), 283. Further, postmodernism is the philosophical underpinning of political correctness. See also Gene Edward Veith Jr., **Postmodern Times** (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1994).

31. USAFA Instruction 36-158, **Supporting Cadet Character Development,** 19 October 1995, 3.

32. **Character Education in U.S. Schools: The New Consensus** (Alexandria, Va.: Character Education Partnership (CEP), 1996), 1. Some other sources that describe the current character-education movement include Kevin Ryan and Thomas A. Lickona, eds., **Character Development in Schools and Beyond** (Washington, D.C.: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1992); Thomas A. Lickona, **Educating for Character: How Our Schools Can Teach Respect and Responsibility** (New York: Bantam Books, 1991); and William Kilpatrick, **Why Johnny Can't Tell Right from Wrong:** Moral Illiteracy and the Case for Character Education (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992). Three national organizations are involved with the character education movement: CEP, Josephson Institute of Ethics, and the Communitarian Network.

33. **Character Education in U.S. Schools,** 1. It also includes cultivating virtues and teaching ethics. Gabriel, 152.

34. We need to set high expectations among our members—"Aim High." People should not perceive those expectations as the lowest common denominator. We should have minimum standards for everyone in the Air Force, but higher standards (and ideals) for noncommissioned officers, officers, and others in command.

35. This also would probably require substantial system reform.

36. James H. Toner, "Gallant Atavism: The Military Ethic in an Age of Nihilism," **Airpower Journal** 10, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 18.

37. The cardinal virtues are so called because they derive from the Latin word **cardo,** meaning **hinge.** Virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do good. The cardinal virtues are prudence (or wisdom), justice (or truthfulness), temperance (or moderation), and fortitude (or courage). The bedrock of the cardinal virtues provides a much firmer foundation than do the core values. Adapted from Toner, unpublished article.

38. One suggestion entails developing a modified character-development model similar to Dr. Lickona's and the USAF Academy's (see page 21 of the **Character Development Manual**).

39. Maj Gen Jerry E. White, "Personal Ethics versus Professional Ethics," **Airpower Journal** 10, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 32–33. The USAF Academy's **Design for Spiritual Development** (Colorado Springs, Colo.: US Air Force Academy, 1994) states that "character education must strike a careful compromise between eliminating religion and teaching faith. It needs to be recognized that character education should never be seen as a replacement for religion or as an instrument of religion" (page 2).

40. Col Robert S. Ainslie et al., **Ethics in the US Air Force: 1988** (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, February 1990).

41. Dr. Toner has developed a concept that places character and ethical principle first, arguing that "Duty, Honor, Country" is neither clear enough nor sufficient. See **True Faith and Allegiance,** 65–70.

Here in America we are descended in blood and in spirit from revolutionists and rebels—men and women who dare to dissent from accepted doctrine. As their heirs, may we never confuse honest dissent with disloyal subversion.

—Gen Dwight D. Eisenhower